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Connecting with northern students

By Chris Montanini, Londoner

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Students at Aqsarniit Middle School use Virtual Researchers On Call to connect with Canadian science, technology, engineering and math experts (Photo Submitted).

London-based charity Partners in Research (PIR) is helping a middle school in Nunavut enjoy its highest attendance rates in six years through a pilot project that's connecting students to science, technology, engineering and math experts from across Canada.

The general idea isn't new to PIR. In 2005, they launched their Virtual Researcher On Call (VROC) program, a video conferencing tool designed to give rural classrooms in Ontario and Alberta real-time access to experts from Canadian universities and colleges.

"What we like about the technology is it allows for real-time, two-way interactive communication between people who want to do outreach and kids that need that support in science, technology, engineering and math education," said Brent Peltola, PIR's director of special projects.

Offering a service like that in parts of northern Canada still relying on dial-up Internet though comes with its own challenges. But last September, Cisco Canada recruited PIR and Internet service provider SSi Micro to offer a similar service at Aqsarniit Middle School in Nunavut.

Officially launched April 2 under the name "Connected North", PIR executive director Kevin Cougler said the program has been successful at getting students into the classroom, making Aqsarniit one of the most well-attended schools in the area, according to a simultaneous study by researchers at York University.

"What we were asked to do was to provide some inspirational moments and speakers so that kids would be really excited about coming to class," Cougler said. "I think the teachers felt that if they had a chance to actually get the kids to the school, then they have a chance to teach them something."

Connected North also utilizes Cisco TelePresence and at the same time, the program is connecting Aqsarniit with other schools across the country.

"It gives them an opportunity to do more of a sociocultural exchange with another classroom of peers somewhere else in the country," Peltola said.

The program will continue in Nunavut next year and expand to the Northwest Territories.

"We're trying to show government, show key people from across Canada the types of things that are possible in these remote communities if we can just get some basic service in there," Cougler said. "In our wildest of dreams what we're trying to accomplish is (bringing) those communities in line with the rest of Canada and give them access to affordable Internet."

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